

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 19 Pt. 3

Lessons from the Journey

If you have been in either of our last two classes, then you are current with the “journey theme” we are using to catch the necessary historical narratives of the Israelites going from Egypt, through forty years in the wilderness, and finally into the Promised Land. As we consider their journey, we have highlighted selected vignettes in ways that draw lessons for life in our individual journeys with the Lord.

With this lesson, we try to draw these vignettes to a close and bring the Israelites “home.” We start with the story we failed to reach in the oral class last week (reproduced from last week’s written lesson), and then bring forward the new vignettes.

LISTEN TO GOD; IF NOT THE FIRST TIME, THEN AT LEAST THE SECOND!

Moses and the Israelites had made it to the Promised Land. As they approached Canaan, Moses followed the LORD’s instructions and sent twelve spies into the land (one from each tribe). Moses wanted to know from the men how populated the country was, how strong the people seemed, features of the land, and a sampling of the land’s produce.

For forty days, the spies went throughout the land, returning with grapes, pomegranates, and figs. The spies also brought back fear. They were afraid of the size of the cities and the size of the people. All but two spies were so distraught that they said to the whole congregation,

Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! (Num. 14:2).

They called God on the carpet for placing them in this position.

Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt? (Num. 14:3).

This rebellion then took a plan,

And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.” (Num. 14:4).

(As a side note, one might realistically ask what they thought Pharaoh would do to these people after the devastating loss of his first born and chariot force.)

The two spies of faith were Joshua and Caleb. Both stood before the pressures of the ten fearful spies and proclaimed their faith in the LORD:

If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us... Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them (Num. 14:8-9).

The people reacted to this faith by calling for the stoning of Joshua and Caleb. Before the rioting could take their lives, the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting and God spoke with Moses.

God identified the decisions by the fearful spies and the congregation as not only unfaithful, but also despising to God and his previous actions. The Lord offered to replace the fuller Israelite people with the Israelite subset of Moses and his descendants.

Moses recited the reasons God should use an alternate punishment and pardon the people. The Lord agrees to the pardon, but adds a punishment of, in essence, granting some of the ill chosen words of the Israelites who said, “would that we had died in this wilderness!” The Lord proclaimed that only Caleb and Joshua out of the Israelites over age 20 would actually see and dwell in the land. The rest would be doomed to wander in the wilderness until they died. The wilderness wanderings were set at one year for each day spent spying (forty days spying equaled forty years in the wilderness). As for the unfaithful spies, God sent a plague that took their lives.

One would think that the disobedient and fearing people would have accepted this punishment, perhaps even repenting of their sin. But, no—instead the people decide to go ahead and try to conquer the Promised Land. Moses warns them not to further disobey God, but they try anyway. The people were soundly defeated.

Point for Home

What happened? We read this story from the vantage point of over 3,000 intervening years and we wonder how the Israelites could be so dumb! It just seems almost beyond comprehension. Yet if we pause, we might reconsider such a harsh judgment. Do we really want our own lives under a microscope? Do we live consistently following the commands of God? Do we not find times where we think the circumstances might bend what we know to be right?

Now as we consider this, we must be careful to note that this is not a story about how people find or keep their eternal salvation. This is a journey story. It is not

simply about sin, but also about answering God's calling. In that sense, the lesson is no different from what Paul taught:

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap (Gal. 6:7).

God equips us to follow his calling. He gives us everything we need to walk in his will. As we do so, the blessings flow. As we rebel, things turn out differently. What is God calling you to do within your journey? Where is he leading you to live and to serve? Are you following his leadership? If not, why not?

REBELLION: BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU ASK FOR (AND BE CAREFUL WHOM YOU FOLLOW)

Four fellows—Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and On led a rebellion against Moses. They took 250 of the leaders from the people and came to Moses. Their complaints took two forms but had one common root: perceived special treatment. They did not like the fact that Moses was exalted from the rest of the people. Similarly, they did not like Aaron and his sons getting to be priests that served as opposed to the Levites that comprised the “support staff” for ministry before the LORD. In their own words to Moses and Aaron:

You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD? (Num. 16:3).

This accusation hurt Moses. It was one of those things that hit him in the face (literally, the text says, “When Moses heard it, he fell on his face”), yet it was a problem that would not go away on its own. These people had come to Moses and Moses now had to deal with the problem.

Moses told the people who wanted the right to serve as the Aaronic priesthood to come up to Moses the next day with censers ready to burn incense to the LORD. As the next day came, however, there were two responses. One group came up ready to claim their right to burn fire and incense before God, while Dathan and Abiram refused to come up to Moses at all. These two said,

We will not come up. Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also make yourself a prince over us? ... We will not come up! (Num. 16:12-14).

Each response got what they asked for, although not quite in the way they expected. The 250 plus who wanted the right to put fire before the LORD showed

up with their censors and incense. Before the entrance of the tent of meeting, they put fire in their censors and laid incense in them. The LORD then warned Moses, and Moses warned the rest of Israel to step away from the rebellious men and their tents. This warning also extended to the tents of Dathan and Abiram, the two that refused to come up to Moses.

The Lord then brought his judgment on these two groups. To Dathan and Abiram, the two that refused to “come up” to Moses, the ground opened up and consumed them and their followers. They would not come up, so they got to “go down” instead.

So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them (Num. 16: 33).

As for the 250 that wanted to offer fire before the LORD, they got their judgment as well. They wanted God’s fire, and they got it, albeit in a manner different than expected! They received a judgment of fire!

And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men offering the incense (Num. 16:35).

This massive judgment did not sit well with the people, and the next day, the grumbling against Moses and Aaron continued, as if Moses or Aaron had brought the judgment. In response, God brought a plague bringing rapid death upon the grumblers until Aaron offered incense and made atonement for the people. This showed all that the LORD was in control, not Moses, not Aaron, and certainly not the rebellious.

Point for Home

Are you a follower of the LORD?

The key to this question is the word “follower.” Jesus found the concept worth underscoring when he asked, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Lk. 6:46). If God is your Lord, then follow him. If he is not, then do as you please. But let us take heed at calling him Lord and following him when his will seems aligned with our own, only to become our own Lord when our desires diverge from his or when our friends lead in a direction away from him.

WHO’S THE BOSS? (A/K/A GIVE CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE)

The scene was somewhat familiar. Water was in short supply, the people were hungry and thirsty, and Moses got the complaints. As Moses and Aaron sought

the LORD on the issue, the “glory of the LORD appeared to them” (Num. 20:6). The LORD instructed Moses:

Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle (Num. 20:8).

What a spectacular miracle this would be for the people! God would bring water forth from a rock that Moses merely spoke to! For some reason, however, Moses disobeyed God.

Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” And Moses lifted his hand and *struck* the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock (Num. 20:10-11).

Note not only the disobedience in Moses, but also where he placed the spotlight! “Shall *we* bring water out of this rock?” Moses spoke only slightly differently from what he should, yet the difference is huge in effect. Moses said, in Hebrew, *notsi*’ (“shall we”) when he should have said *yotsi*’ (“shall he”).

This might seem slight, but there is a chasm of difference in these two choices. It is the difference between acknowledging the LORD as the supreme and only God and choosing magic. In the ancient world, the gods were not supreme. They were subject to laws of magic which enabled the tricky and those with special knowledge to control the gods. People could manipulate the divine through using certain spells, incantations, or objects of divination.

Of course the truth of monotheism, the truth of YHWH, is far removed. God is not some powerful device we can control or maneuver to our ends. He is the Supreme God who is over all and in control of all.

For Moses to stand before the people and declare that his invoking the power of God to bring forth water was an act of Moses and Aaron, crossed the line. Instead of declaring that God had decided to bring forth the water, Moses made it seem that Moses and Aaron were using God to do the impossible. God became part of the magic show. God was at the disposal of Moses to do as Moses instructed.

This was a grave mistake on Moses’ part. God took Moses’ future as leader into the Promised Land away from him in the presence of the people. God was letting the people know that he was not dependent on Moses and *neither were they*. They would make it in the Promised Land because God was in control, not Moses. This punishment of Moses served to further the deeper-seated problem of who was in

control. Was God at Moses' beck and call or was it God himself who was leading the Israelites?

Point for Home

We all have our support systems. We have our coping mechanisms. We have our successes and we have our sources of confidence. As believers in covenant with God, we need to keep fresh before us our true role in life. We are his followers. We are to seek his will, and by his grace and Spirit, do his will. 24/7. 365 days a year. It really is that simple. Let everything we have, everything we rely on, find its ultimate place before God. He is our true strength and song. He is the source of every good gift. Unless he builds the house, it is built in vain. Unless we shelter in him, we have no real shelter. He is not our pawn to do our bidding; we are his people to seek his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven!

THE BLIND DIVINER

Sometimes we might think that God worked and interacted only with the Israelites and those interfacing with them, yet Paul knew that God made his invisible nature clear to all people (Rom. 1:19-21). Paul also wrote that God was responsible for all governing authorities, not merely those involved with Israel (Rom. 13:1-2).

We might not be surprised to learn that there were those not of Israel who heard the voice of the LORD. In Numbers 22, for example, we learn of a man named Balaam, the son of Beor. Balaam was not an Israelite, he did not live in the midst of the Israelites, and yet he was a well-known diviner who repeated the things he heard from YHWH.

The scene unfolds when Israel was encamped in the area of Moab. The king of Moab (Balak) sent messengers to Balaam asking him to curse the Israelites. Balaam made clear that he was not a sorcerer (one who performs magic like curses), but rather a diviner (one who hears supernatural messages and repeats them). So Balaam explained that he could not curse Israel, but only could repeat whatever he heard from YHWH.

Overnight, God appeared to Balaam and instructed him that he could not curse the Israelites, for God had blessed them. Balaam sent away the king's messengers explaining he was not available to help.

The king then sent more prestigious men to enlist Balaam for cursing the Israelites. The new set of men brought money and promises of rich reward from the king in return for Balaam's cursing of the Israelites. Again, Balaam explained that for all the money in the world, the extent of his ability was to simply repeat what message he divined. Notwithstanding the instructions Balaam had already

received from the LORD, he still was willing to seek out a new opinion, should the men agree to stay overnight.

The men stayed, and this time the LORD spoke to Balaam in the night and told the persistent diviner to go ahead and leave and go to the king. Balaam saddled up his donkey the next morning and left with the king's servants. God was none too pleased with Balaam's actions and placed an angel in the road, with sword drawn, blocking the donkey.

In a bit of irony, the internationally famous diviner could not see the messenger of God, even though his donkey could! The donkey deviated from the road to avoid the angel and sword. The non-divining diviner struck his donkey to get him back on the road. A second time the angel blocked the way and the donkey scraped Balaam's foot in an effort to avoid the angel. Balaam again beat the donkey. A third time the donkey saw the angel and this time there was no way to avert collision. The donkey chose to lay down on the ground under Balaam. A third time Balaam struck the donkey.

The irony of the diviner having less sight of the divine than his donkey continued as the diviner beat his beast the third time and the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey so he could talk!

What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?
(Num. 22:28).

Balaam responds with complaints of the donkey's disobedience. The donkey conveying a message with insight beyond that of the diviner simply heightens the irony of the story. Balaam then expressed his desire to smite the donkey with a sword, not realizing yet that the donkey was sparing Balaam from the sword.

At this point, YHWH intervenes and opens the eyes of Balaam to see as well as the donkey. The LORD then explains that the donkey was saving the life of Balaam, even as Balaam was beating the donkey. The LORD reemphasizes the need for Balaam to speak only as God speaks to Balaam, and Balaam then goes to the Moabite king.

Four times the king tries to get Balaam to curse the Israelites. Each time, however, Balaam just blesses the Israelites, much to the king's displeasure! Balaam then left the king and returned home. Balak, unable to curse the Israelites, instead turned to seduction, both sexual and spiritual adultery, as his means of diluting their strength.¹

¹ In Revelation, the church at Pergamum is singled out for having some who "hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality" (Rev. 2:14).

Point for Home

This is a journey story with multiple points from which we might learn or relate. We select two points and invite you to consider more on your own. First, there is a note of humility that cries out from the story. The internationally famous diviner cannot divine as well as the brute beast of the field, even when his own life is at stake. As we hear the word of the Lord, we should always keep a measure of humility rather than arrogant confidence in what we see and what we know.

Second, the affairs of this world are in God's hands. We do not direct God in the cosmos's drama; God is the director. Our prayer, accordingly, should be, "Thy will be done."

EVERYTHING THAT EXISTS IN TIME, RUNS OUT OF TIME SOMEDAY²

How do you feel about death? Do you dread it? Fight it? Ignore it? Does it frighten you? Have you ever seen anyone die? If so, how did it affect you? We have all heard the lines about the unavoidability of death and taxes. We know intellectually that death awaits us all. How do we live in light of that eventuality?

For forty years, the Israelites traversed the wilderness, while the unfaithful generation died off. During this wilderness sojourn, we also had the death of Miriam, Moses' sister (Num. 20:1). Aaron finally died as well. We read in Numbers 20 that Moses and Aaron were on Mount Hor and the Lord instructed Moses to take Aaron's priestly garments off Aaron and put them on Eleazar, Aaron's son. After Moses did so, Aaron died on the mountain and the congregation of Israel wept for thirty days.

In Deuteronomy 31, we read about Moses reaching the age of 120, and realizing that his time to die was at hand. Knowing that he would not be allowed to cross into the Promised Land, Moses prepared the people by handing over leadership responsibilities to Joshua. Moses then wrote the law for the priests and people, and gave instructions for regular reading of it to the people. Moses also put the experiences of the Israelites into a long song that he taught them—a way for the illiterate to remember and pass on the experiences related to the exodus. Moses called the people of Israel together and delivered his blessing over them, tribe by tribe.

² Cockburn, Bruce, "Mighty Trucks of Midnight," *Nothing But A Burning Light CD*, 1991.

Deuteronomy draws to a close telling us that after the blessings on the tribes, Moses went up to Mount Nebo where the LORD showed him the Promised Land. Having stood on Mount Nebo, I can readily attest that the view of the holy land is very much along the lines and descriptors given in Deuteronomy. Moses died isolated from the people. Even though he died at age 120, “His eye was undimmed, and his vigor unabated” (Dt. 34:7). Upon his death, the reigns of leadership did go to Joshua.

Point for Home

We should notice that Moses did a marvelous job getting others ready for his death. He got his successor in place. He took control over the successor of Aaron. He best ensured the continued teaching of both law and the memory of experiences and interactions with the LORD. Moses then continued to walk as God instructed him, with vigor and purpose.

Death is a door before us all. Some of us are closer to it; others farther away. Some do not like to think about it; others consider it multiple times a week!

Regardless of where we stand in relation to that door, we can make a resolution to live like Moses. We should seek God’s will and purpose in our lives, living it daily in his honor and ways. We can prepare others for life after our departure, seeking to confirm them in their faith. Then once that door is opening to life after death, and once this door is closing, we can walk with confidence, awe, and expectation, knowing our Promised Land is on the other side!

WANT MORE?

Start (or keep) reading Judges. Which character do you relate to? Email me and let me know who and why! Emails remain anonymous! Email us at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com.